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EUR FOR A/S FRIED, DAS BRYZA, AND CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/13/2019
 TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#) [AM](#)
 SUBJECT: ARMENIAN OPPOSITION TO BRAND PRESIDENT SARGSIAN A
 "TRAITOR TO THE NATION"

Classified By: DCM Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (C) A close advisor to former President and current opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP) told DCM April 14 that LTP would brand President Sargsian as a "traitor to the Armenian nation" in a May 1 rally for Sargsian's alleged willingness to agree to Turkey's proposal to establish a joint historical commission to study Armenian genocide claims. Ter-Petrossian, who will head the opposition ticket in the critical May 31 Yerevan mayoral race, plans to make Sargsian's "treachery" a key theme in his campaign. The advisor, David Shahnazarian, said that LTP and his supporters were so infuriated by Sargsian's recent comments concerning the March 1 prisoners that they saw "no choice but to play this card" against the President.

¶2. (C) DCM pushed back hard, arguing that by indulging in such political expediency, LTP would be undercutting his longtime position in favor of Turkey-Armenia normalization and reconciliation. In addition, the opposition should understand that a campaign of this kind would create a terrible impression in Washington at this critical time in Turkish-Armenian discussions. Shahnazarian responded rather sheepishly, claiming that he was "personally opposed" to LTP's decision, but was unable to influence his boss because of "our 50 people who have been in jail for more than a year."

¶3. (S) COMMENT: It is not clear why Shahnazarian chose to tell us about LTP's impending attack against the President on the Turkey issue -- it is possible that he wanted to gauge our reaction before moving ahead. In any case, a sustained campaign by LTP over the next several months would significantly complicate President Sargsian's ability to move forward on normalization with Turkey. LTP's planned broadside will come at a time when other voices -- most notably former Foreign Minister Oskanian and Dashnak mouthpiece Giro Manoyan -- are calling for a halt to the Turkey-Armenia process in response to PM Erdogan's comments linking the process to N-K. (Oskanian and the Dashnaks are each aligned with former President Kocharian, and this may be a coordinated effort to play the nationalist card against Sargsian.)

¶4. (S) Comment continued: The Ambassador has already requested a meeting with LTP to discuss this issue further, and will suggest to him that a decision to go down this path will mean burning his bridges with the new Administration. The Ambassador will make clear to LTP that the USG will continue its strong support for Turkey-Armenia normalization. As the political stakes are about to be raised on the Turkey issue, we believe that sustained, senior-level U.S. engagement with President Sargsian will be necessary to keep the GOAM on board. Such engagement would ideally begin before LTP kicks off his campaign on May 1. End Comment.

YOVANOVITCH